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*Testimony of*

*Ray Rossomando*

*Connecticut Education Association*

*Before the Education Committee*

**SB 381 AA ESTABLISHING A TASK FORCE TO STUDY SCHOOL CLIMATE**

**HB 5557 AAC RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS**

**HB 5556 AAC CONCERNING THE REGIONAL UNIFORM SCHOOL CALENDAR**

**HB 5550 AAC VARIOUS REVISIONS AND ADDITIONS TO THE EDUCATION STATUTES**

*March 7, 2016*

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Ray Rossomando, Research and Policy Specialist with the Connecticut Education Association. CEA helps the 43,000 active and retired teachers across the state to have a greater voice in the decisions that affect students, classrooms, and the teaching profession.

CEA is testifying on various bills under consideration.

**SB 381 AA ESTABLISHING A TASK FORCE TO STUDY SCHOOL CLIMATE**

CEA supports SB381. However, the term school climate has been used somewhat more narrowly in Connecticut, relating primarily to bullying legislation that has passed in recent years. While continued attention to school bullying is important, CEA urges the committee to consider the broader policy arena of school climate that has been shown to be a critical component for improving student achievement.

By definition, a school's climate reflects the shared ideas – assumptions, values, beliefs – and practices that define its culture and standards for expected behavior.<sup>1</sup> There is mounting evidence that a positive school climate increases student achievement.<sup>2</sup> A school climate that contributes to learning focuses on essential components, including safety and strong relationships between teaching and learning.<sup>3</sup> Building a positive school climate means ensuring that teachers have access to needed resources, relevant professional development, and a participatory role in decision making. These are also critical ingredients in attracting and retaining teachers, especially teachers from underrepresented minority communities.

Additionally, a positive school climate means that students, staff, and visitors all feel safe. Threats to their physical and emotional safety (e.g. bullying) can take a great toll on students, leading some to be fearful of attending<sup>4</sup> and ultimately impacting student learning.<sup>5</sup> Bullying does not only impact the children in schools. Growing evidence indicates that a significant number of teachers are treated disrespectfully, threatened, and even physically assaulted by students every year, further deteriorating the school climate.<sup>6</sup>

A school climate that builds a culture of mutual trust and respect, engages participants, and supports a relationship between teaching and learning can improve childhood health and academic performance.<sup>7</sup> Ensuring that a school's learning environment is sensitive to its culturally and linguistically diverse student body results in stronger connections between each student and teacher.

CEA also urges the committee to include language specifically calling on the task force to review the TELL (Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning) School Climate Survey for potential use in Connecticut. The TELL Survey is a validated tool that provides invaluable information to parents, educators, and policymakers at the state and local level about the school climate strengths and needs of schools. It has been used by many state education agencies across the nation in collaboration with teachers, administrators, and superintendents. It could be a valuable tool for use in our state.

For more information on TELL, please visit <http://newteachercenter.org/approach/teaching-empowering-leading-and-learning-tell/>

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<sup>1</sup> Tableman, B. & Herron, A. (2004.) School climate and learning. *Best Practice Brief*. (31).

<sup>2</sup> Hirsch, E., Sioberg, A., Robertson, J., & Church, K. (2011). *Improving teacher working conditions: Lessons from North Carolina schools*. Retrieved from [http://ncteachingconditions.org/sites/default/files/attachments/NC10\\_brief\\_ImprovingTWC.pdf](http://ncteachingconditions.org/sites/default/files/attachments/NC10_brief_ImprovingTWC.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2010). *School climate brief*, 1(1).

<sup>4</sup> Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., Zeira, A., & Vinokur, A. (2002). School climate, observed risky behaviors, and victimization as predictors of high school students' fear and judgments of school violence as a problem, *Health Education & Behavior*, 29(6), 716-736.

<sup>5</sup> Devine, J. & Cohen, J. (2007). *Making your school safe: Strategies to protect children and promote learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.

<sup>6</sup> Dworkin, A. G., Haney, C. A., & Telschow, R. L. (1998). Fear, victimization, and stress among urban public school teachers. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 9(2), 159-171.

<sup>7</sup> McNeely, C. A., Nonnemaker, J. M., & Blum, R. W. (2002). Promoting student connectedness to school: Evidence from the national longitudinal study of adolescent health. *Journal of School Health*, 72, 138-146.

#### **HB 5557 AAC RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS**

CEA supports HB5557. Akin to other state policies that ensure prevailing wages for undervalued work, HB5557 takes important steps toward ensuring a livable and competitive salary for high-quality early childhood teachers.

As you know, the importance of early education has been repeatedly reinforced in research. Much of a child's intellectual, emotional, and social growth take place before the age of six, and the skills that a child learns at this age provides the foundation for later success in school and life. A skilled early childhood teacher can make all the difference in the life of child, helping them develop essential social skills, learn in developmentally appropriate ways, become enthusiastic learners who enjoy going to school.

Unfortunately, the critically important work of early educators is undervalued. The average preschool teacher makes 40% less than a kindergarten teacher, even though the work they do is remarkably similar. Without better pay, the individuals with the skills to teach our young children will not be attracted to the profession, and those who already have positions may leave or be unable to afford the education and training that could help them enhance their pedagogical skills. Connecticut has experienced both these trends as early childhood teacher shortages and revolving door turnover have been exacerbated by noncompetitive wages. It is our children who will lose out and the resulting long-term cost to society will be incalculable.

#### **HB 5556 AAC CONCERNING THE REGIONAL UNIFORM SCHOOL CALENDAR**

CEA reserves judgement on HB5556 at this time. It is not yet known which districts are not in compliance with new regional calendars. Consequently, the overall impact on district funding and working conditions cannot yet be determined.

#### **HB 5550 AAC VARIOUS REVISIONS AND ADDITIONS TO THE EDUCATION STATUTES**

**Section 11:** CEA opposes Sec. 11, which would expand law to allow students in marital and family therapist licensure programs to provide counseling services to students and families. Current law already permits graduates of such programs who have earned a license to practice in schools – a service that would otherwise require teacher certification.

This proposal would set a dangerous precedent and allow potentially unqualified candidates to provide counseling and/or therapy to our most vulnerable citizens. Licensure exists to ensure candidates have met rigorous standards. An applicant in Connecticut must earn a master's or doctoral degree in a mental health field from a regionally accredited institution of higher education, invest over 3,000 hours of supervised experience in professional counseling, and pass a rigorous examination. Such measures exist to protect the health, safety, and welfare of our citizens and to assure the public all marital and family counselors in the state are competent practitioners. Individuals who work directly with children in a

school setting should be held to even higher standards and not be permitted to bypass, even temporarily, a critical step in the credentialing process.

**Section 13:** CEA supports this provision, which clarifies search and seizure laws involving student electronic devices. Unlike the contents of backpacks, pockets, address books, or lockers, electronic devices like cell phones contain enormous amounts of personal and family information. While there are times when it may be necessary to search students' personal items, such searches should not also expose personal information that is unrelated to the search. This section appropriately balances the security needs of schools with the civil protections of students and families. We urge its support.

Thank you.



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Testimony Regarding

Raised Bill 5554

An Act Concerning Regional Education

made before the

Education Committee

March 7, 2016

Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, members of the Education Committee - my name is John Filchak, Executive Director of the Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments. I also come before you today as a member of the Commission on Municipal Opportunities and Regional Efficiencies (MORE) where I chaired the Education Policy Working Group for the Regional Entities Subcommittee. **Raised Bill 5554 speaks directly to issues we examined through the Education Policy Working Group and I urge your favorable consideration of this legislation.**

One of the central findings, addressed in Section 1 of the bill) and recommendations in our report (attached) was the *"improving the collection, quality and dissemination of data essential to decision making and investments of public resources."* Our findings include: "Accurate data is essential to school system decision making. Some towns, though not a majority, allocate local resources to gain access to otherwise unavailable district data - including enrollment projections. Currently, neither the State nor its regions has a systematic way of documenting and analyzing the scope of projected changes in district or regional enrollment patterns or to provide resources to towns that face the resulting challenges. The State Department of Education provided this data in the past, but is not currently providing enrollment projections. The Connecticut State Data Center at the University of Connecticut creates population projections for the state, COG regions and towns, but does not address school or district enrollment projections." Raised Bill 5558 will require that the Commissioner of Education and the State Data Center at UCONN work together to generate timely and accurate data to assist in school building projects - looking not just at the applicant district but those districts adjacent to the applicant district. Again, from our report: "School capacity varies greatly across the state - some schools face closure due to dwindling enrollment while others are realizing over-crowded classrooms. The Department of Administrative Services collects data on school capacity, but it is not reported at the region or district-level. Proposals to consider school closures are reported within individual towns, but often do not circulate beyond those communities. Schools in close proximity are often managed by different entities (i.e. vocational technical and district schools). Better data on capacity and potential closures would aid state and regional entities in planning and help to identify opportunities for inter-municipal cooperation."

Section 2 and 3 of Raised Bill 5554 address another key element of our report: "The six RESCs are well established as regional providers and facilitators of services to their member districts. The expertise developed by the RESCs could be applied to non-educational service sharing expansion areas, such as: Cooperative bid expansion, Facilities management, Food services, Transportation, School safety and security, Technology, Health and wellness, Central purchasing, Electronic document management, Sharing non-educational services between towns and school boards." The RESCs and the COGs are central to the development of regionalism in Connecticut. The language proposed in Section 2 provides the opportunity for school districts to utilize these regional resources to achieve economies of scale - saving money and increasing efficiencies.

In closing, I want to express my thanks and appreciation to the members of MORE Commission Regional Entities Subcommittee Education Policy Working Group for their work during the past many months and in particular Representative Johnson for her participation and leadership in studying the issues and developing a set of solid recommendations.

Thank you.